

Testimony
Education Committee
Governor's Bill SB 24
Sharon M. Palmer

Feb. 22, 2012

Good afternoon Sen. Stillman, Rep. Fleischmann, and members of the Committee. Thanks again for providing another opportunity to remark on this important bill.

I am Sharon Palmer, President of AFT Connecticut, a diverse 28,000 member AFL-CIO union.

We applaud the work of the ECS taskforce and acknowledge it as a work in progress. We support the increase in the foundation, urge caution in allowing reductions in the MBR and ask you to look carefully at the discretionary power afforded the Commissioner of Education.

We note the significant increase in funding to charter schools. The bill requires the local school board to pay at least the per pupil cost to the charter school. We find the "at least" language troublesome considering the substantial increase in state funding. We suggest the total of state and local per pupil allocations be no more than the expenditures in the charter school home district.

We are extremely pleased to see language requiring chart schools to recruit and retain a more diverse student population. We suggest a stronger initiative. We would like to see every student in a district where a charter is located be placed in a lottery drawing which will assure random selection and equal opportunity for all children. We also would like to see charter schools report on student retention which includes data on special education and ELL students.

We object to the changes in collective bargaining throughout the bill. We fail to see how reducing the collective bargaining rights of teachers will help to attract and retain teachers to work in our neediest districts.

Our union has enjoyed a very good working relationship with Commissioner Pryor and we know he is passionate and dedicated to

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improving Connecticut's schools. We note the unprecedented power given to the Commissioner of Education. It is extraordinary and some would say needed to close the achievement gap. We urge caution and question whether this is necessary to accomplish the task at hand. Consider the following actions the Commissioner may take:

- Replace the Board of Education, Superintendent of Schools, Principals and teachers
- Transfer or assign Principals, teachers and other personnel
- Hold increased funding for districts
- Waive any rule or regulation of a local Board of Education
- Reduce MBR
- Control district spending
- Terminate grants at any time
- Require parents and guardians to attend training
- Give school operations to a private entity which may be a no-bid contract
- Restrict collective bargaining
- Decide which reconstitution model will be used
- Power to supersede several state statutes
- Continued powers for five (5) years

This is by no means a complete list – but gives you a sample of the extent of control over local districts and schools.

We ask you to review the broadly designated tasks in totality to consider whether any one person should make so many decisions. Let me state again for the record that we do not question the capability of Commissioner Pryor, but raise the question as a good government/policy issue.

Yesterday we stated what we hope this legislation will accomplish. Let me reassert our commitment to help in getting this very important work completed. You have a huge task before you. If we can be helpful, please ask.

Thank you for your time and all that you do.